DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 146 632 CS 203 776

AUTHOR Neumeyer, Peter
TITLE What Makes a Good Children's Book? The Art of the Word: Significance in Stories for Young People.
PUB DATE Mar 77
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Children's Literature Association (4th, Ypsilanti, Michigan, March 25-27, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescent Literature; *Childrens Literature; *Composition (Literary); *Language Usage; *Literary Analysis; Literary Criticism; Standards; *Textual Criticism
IDENTIFIERS Potter (Beatrix); White (E B); Zindel (Paul)

ABSTRACT

A "good" book may be defined as a book that is rich and dense in texture and that draws on many authorial resources. This paper demonstrates the way in which richness in word usage contributes to making books good. It discusses the way in which words are emotionally charged and then analyzes the use of individual words in a brief portion of an A. A. Milne story, in Beatrix Potter's "Peter Rabbit," in Paul Zindel's "I Never Loved Your Mind," and in E. B. White's "Charlotte's Web." All four authors are judged to use words skillfully, and "Charlotte's Web" is judged to display especial denseness, richness, and textural intricacy. (GW)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED146632

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

What Makes a Good Children's Book?

The Art of the Word: Significance in Stories for Young People

Written originally in March, 1977, for the fourth Annual Conference of the Children's Literature Association, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Mich. March 25-27, 1977.

Peter Neumeyer
Chairman, Department of English
West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia
26506

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Peter Neumeyer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

CS203776

THE ART OF THE WORD: SIGNIFICANCE IN STORIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Originally, I had submitted for this conference a paper titled "The Art of the Word: significance in stories for young children." Using as a case in point Paul Zindel's adolescent novel, I Never Loved Your Mind, I sought to show that because of the manner in which Dewey Daniels, the teen-aged main character, slightly misuses mature words, we have a Salingeresque picture of a disillusioned adolescent who is word-intoxicated, if academically cynical--the kind of youngster quite apt to become a writer--like Zindel, like Salinger.

The paper was accepted--conditionally. The condition being that I not leave it at that, but that I demonstrate "what is the relationship between 'significant words' and a good book?"

I accepted the task--and that was the beginning of my agony and my pleasure--for the thinking I did consequently in a special freshman honors section in children's literature has led me to a thesis only the beginning of which I hope to demonstrate in this paper.

The real question, the question of this conference--"what makes a good book good?"--is the question I set myself and my seminar. And I shall now venture an answer.

The answer: denseness of texture. And what is that? Taking the textilian metaphor literally, it means close warp; close woof. Many threads to the inch. Denseness is allied to richness. There's simply a lot there, a lot put into the book, by an author with many resources, and consequently a lot to consider by a readier with developed capacities.

Following that line of reasoning, I turned again to Zindel's book, examining the verbal skill employed in the self-revelation of the main character. And indeed it was well done. But the more I contemplated, the more I realized that, following my definition of "goodness," there were even richer books, denser books, books drawing on even more resources--and hence better books. And so, though I propose to look at the verbal felicity of the depiction of Dewey Daniels in I Never Loved Your Mind, I shall conclude by moving to Charlotte's Web as an example of an infinitely richer and more resourceful book yet--still speaking of words only.

Let me emphasize: goodness is richness. This paper focusses on the most elementary building block of such literary goodness only--the word. The individual word. It is an introductory paper only, touching on richness in the use of the word. It does not move beyond that to syntax; to authorial techniques of distancing and plotting; not to speak of the place a story takes among the word's tales, as they partake of old traditions or mirror psychological truths. It touches merely on the demonstration of literary goodness through its manifestation in The Word.

Sylvia Ashton Warner alerted us to the significance of the individual word when she theorized that every one of her young Maori students had what she considered an "organic" vocabulary, inner pictures, "captions of the mind . . . that have the power and the light." A child's first words "must be made of the stuff of the child itself," she stated, and in her teaching, instead of using the prefabrications of reading specialists, she would ask her pupils what word each wanted to learn. From their inner lives the children would draw forth, not innocuous and monosyllabic "look" and "see," but frequently words that meant intensely to them as individuals--words such as JoeJoe's "king of the Rocket Men Indian Phantom Superman . . ." These words, Sylvia Ashton & Warner would then print on cards for the children, the children would take them and make them their own more even than they would have with "Spot" and "Jane."

Words are emotionally charged, and when they touch us, it has been demonstraded that we respond fully, psychologically, with heart, with sweat glands. Polygraphs are only one instrument giving empirical proof.

The words in stories for children, then, may elicit an inner resonance, give rich pleasure, and carry a burden of meaning, that is significan to the child. They may merely "sound good"--Sendak's "Higglety Pigglty Pop," in which, to be technical, the two opening dactyls speak trippingly on the tongue.

Or, they may be magical--even if not fully understood--as

A. A. Milne realized when he had Piglet live in a house in the middle of a beech-tree, and next to the beech-tree a sign, "Trespassers W." Piglet tells Christopher Robin that the sign was his grandfather's, whose name was Trespassers William (Actually, grandfather had two names, "Trespassers after an uncle, and William after Trespassers.") In that passage, which must be as unforgettable to millions of children as it is to me, Milne hit on the manner in which an individual word, even if not fully understood, but by its sound, its shape, its ambiance, may take on significance and meaning even if, or perhaps partly because, it is not fully understood.

To put it another way--precisely not knowiwing the exact meaning of a word, say a word for a part of the anatomy, or even for sexual intercourse, ~~xxkxxxxxxxxx~~ makes the word take on for a child a measure of magical power, and gives to that word a numinous suggestion of a larger mystery--"Jaweh"--"Trespassers W."

Let us move, now, to another artist of the word. Let us examine the deceptively simple, but consumately skilfull management of the ~~X~~ slightest verbal expression--by Beatrix Potter--in Peter Rabbit.

Peter, you recall, was told NOT to go into Mr. MacGreggor's cabbage patch. But being a naughty rabbit, of course that is precisely what he did. And a dangerous and a frightening time he had of it, escaping just ahead of the furiously pursuing Mr. MacGreggor, who was determined to have rabbit pie that night. But escape Peter did, never stopping running or looking behind him until

he got home to the big fir tree. "I am sorry to say," the author tells us, "that Peter was not very well during the evening." He was given camomile tea and put to bed, whereas his siblings had bread and milk and blackberries for supper. And what is significant, and what should be of interest to us when we are looking for the artistry in words, is the almost unnoticed and the extraordinarily skillful "I am sorry to say."

How easy it would have been for Potter to preach, "don't disobey your mother. Go running off into strange cabbage patches and you'll be put to bed." But such an admonition would not win us over, might even frighten us. We, too, might become filling for someone's pie. But how subtly and ingeniously Beatrix Potter, the authritative teller, has aligned herself with the naughty ~~xxbbxxxx~~ rabbit in us all: "I am sorry to say," says Beatrix Potter, "that Peter was not very well . . ." And so we have, then, the teller, powerful and presumably knowing all, still on the side of the malcreant. "I am sorry to say"--admonition seasoned with sympathy. I am sorry--because Peter was naughty. I am sorry--because it must be unpleasant to be "not very well" during an evening. And, I am sorry (as my wife reminded me when she read this paper)--becuase it's not very nice not to have blackberries for dessert when everybody else does. The mixture of maternal reproach and compassion, the measured distance, perspective, and tone, are perfect for this economical tale. And that perfection, again, has sprung from the artful choice of individual words--a choice made so subtly that perhaps only those who have tried to do it themselves are fullin in a position to appreciate.

Let me now move on to a more loquacious book--the Zindel which started all this, and demonstrate the author's skilled technique of rendering character by the character's own words. Dewey Daniels, the fictional narrator, is a prcocious, world-weary, affection-craving, and lonely high school drop-out, telling his own story. He puts his plight before us in the opening paragraph.

I have given you a ditto of this paragraph, with the words underlined to which I call your attention. This is the first papragraph in the book, and our introduction to its protagonist at the same time.

> If you knew I was a seventeen-year-old handsome guy hacking out this verbose volume of literary ecstasy, you'd probably think I was one of those academic genii who run home after a titillating day at school, panting to commence cello lessons. I regret to inform you, however, that I do not suffer from scholasticism ofthe brain. In fact, I suffer from it so little I dropped out of my puerile, jerky high school exactly eleven months ago.

Now, the words Dewey uses are not those of a retardate.

[redacted] They are the words of a curious and verbal youngster--but one who does not know fully and completely how to use words naturally and as they are used by one who has over many years become comfortable with them. As yet, they are strange and new words to the speaker, and he juxtaposes some of them revealingly with other words of a much lower level of formality, words with which they don't usually keep company. See, for example, the juxtaposition of "puerile" and "jerky"--a "puerile, jerky high school." "Puerile," derived from puer, boy, meant originally, boyish, and later, in its extended sense, childish. But the slightly esoteric, literate, latinate "puerile," corresponds of course not at all in tone, in elevation, with the colloquial "jerky." To be technical, two levels of diction are mixed here--and the mixture is not in the least "wrong," but precise and accurate in the manner in which it renders for us the lack of experience and the failure of verbal discrimination of a bright teenager to whom words and meanings are appealing, but new.

Similarly, Dewey applies to himself the word "hacking." Is the word derived from the term, "hack writer"--i.e. a paid-by-the-word writer? Is it invented by Dewey? The usage is unconventional, to say the least. And "verbose" is an adjective used to describe someone who talks too much. It describes someone; not something; not a volume. The word is used almost correctly by Dewey, but not quite. "Genii," as Latin plural for "genius," is technically correct, but unusual to say the least, and again suggests someone who likes to build with words as does someone who is using unfamiliar tools. Off key--but only ever so

slightly. A "titillating" day--again, not quite the way one uses the word normally, though one could. By "commence" cello lessons, Dewey means simply to begin. "Commence" is artificial, a bureaucratic word--but, quickly we are learning, Dewey is not one to use the short and simple term if he can experiment with one that seems to him more refined, more elegant, more literary, or merely one that will allow him to indulge the adolescent passion for experimenting with all the new things a seventeen-year-old world can put at his disposal--drink, sex, the analysis of his emotions, or, simply, words. "Scholasticism" of the brain represents, of course, Dewey's complete misunderstanding of a word. "I don't like school learning," Dewey is saying (and surely the entire book makes clear to us that we may not confuse school learning with either intelligence, or real, experiential, learning. The latter is what goes on throughout the book.). "Scholasticism" refers to the philosophy of the medieval church fathers, but Dewey makes the natural-enough assumption that the word refers to "school," and so, by extension. he can talk of "scholasticism of the brain"--a condition in which one presumably takes intellectual pleasure in the kind of learning that is stock-in-trade in schools.

Now, before proceding to the final exhibit, let me remind you again of my thesis:

A good book is a dense book, a rich book, a book which exemplifies rich resources. These resources run the gamut from the word alone, to the book's entirety, viewed in the history and the tradition of the world's literature. But this paper is limited to an examination and a demonstration of richness as exemplified in the word alone--the first step merely--the first and necessary step.

That the word is significant, Sylvia Ashton Warner has argued convincingly; Milne has demonstrated felicitously; and Beatrix Potter has shown with great subtlety. Zindel recognizes the power of diction (choice of words) in his first and pregnant draft of his character. But let me now, in the time remaining, merely suggest what I have filled in with much greater detail in a paper much too long for the present occasion: the immense denseness, richness, textural intricacy achieved in a book I need not recapitulate for this audience, E. B. White's Charlotte's Web--and in its use of the word alone. I merely summarize:

The first sentence of the book: "Where's Papa going with that ax?"

The words are simple and basic. When Caesar's legions invaded Britain, they brought with them a language of poly-syllabic words to express the complex relations of governmental administration in which the Romans excelled. But these are not

the words of White's book. His vocabulary is as anglo-saxon, and hence, I would argue, as primal, as human, as humane, as that of almost any book of our time.

"Where" from O. E. hwaer; "Papa" not even given national designation in the dictionary, being implicitly almost a neuro-genetically acquired and universal word, like "Mama." "Go" from O. E. gan, from *I. E. ghe, related to a Sanskrit root. "With" from O. E., from I. E., and source also of the German "wider"--against. Ax--not only does the traceable etymology of the word support its O. E. and Gothic origins, but appropriately it is the archetypical human, neanderthal if you like, tool. This story, Charlotte's Web, is, to put it in Wordsworth's eloquent phrase, "writ in language such as men do use."

Second point--the characters' names: the main family, the Arables. Arable, of course means plowable. The plowables own the land, and own the pig, Wilbur, around whom the plot revolves.

And the main Arable is the little girl, Fern. Fern Arable. Fern, a plant so ancient that its earliest evidences are fossilized, are paleographic.

Mrs. Arable is simply Fern's mother, or Mrs. Arable. She dreams of deep freezers, as any generic missus would. And Mr. Arable is Mr. Arable, simply. The Farmer, not further distinguished, cousin of Lenski's pasteboard "Farmer Small."

Wilbur, with all respects to a possible Wilbur in the audience, sports an amiable, if perhaps somewhat lumpish, name.

Dr. Dorian, the closest thing to a choral interpreter of the mysterious commerce between child and animal and nature in this story, is not named randomly either, having a name identical to the name of the Greeks in the mythical Attic past, the Greece of the bucolic, of the pastoral, of Hesiod in the ninth century, who wrote of the rural year, who preceded the Theocritan idyll and the Virgilian eclogue, all a part of the noble lineage in which E. B. White surely saw his own work when, in his just published letters, we read him referring to Charlotte's Web as a "paean to the barn,"--a song of praise. Dr. Dorian points the way for us.

Thirdly, merely acoustically (I don't think it's a matter of onomatopoeia) quality of words, proper words for proper characters. Take Templeton, the rat, whose incarnation is emblematic of the physical and moral putridness we intend to signify when calling someone a "rat." In the first chapter in which he is introduced, Templeton, the rat, says White, crept "stealthily along the wall and disappeared into a private tunnel that he had dug between the door and thr trough. . . Templeton was a crafty rat. The tunnel was an example of his skill and cunning."

"Dug," "door,", and "trough," are, for Lord only knows what reasons, surreptitious and plough-nosed words. Not open, clean, easy words with healthy pure vowels and crisp consonants, but "ough" words, words of off sound, deceptively different to the ear than the letters comprising them would lead an honest man to

believe. It is as when, in literature, breasts are called "dugs," thus taking on a pendulousness and barnyard rancidity worthy to keep company with dung and general dinginess.

Templeton, the crafty rat, the rat of sill and cunning, digger of tunnels, possessor of a mind of labyrinthian deviousness, is said by White to "creep out at night and have a feast . . . in the trampled grass of the infield where you will find old discarded lunch boxes containing foul remains of peanut butter sandwiches."

The word "creep" is again one of those simple felicities of diction White employs, bringing to mind precisely the same word--leep and creep, in fact--used in the first voyage of Gulliver's Travels to describe the fawning sycophancy of the Lilliputian courtiers performing for their majesty. "Foul" indeed the food and the belly-filling for which Templeton lives, and the general moral depravity painted by White's diction as much as it is by the recounting of Templeton's actions. And strongly does such language contrast to the pure, simple, straight-forward address of simple, honest Wilbur, like Squire Alworthy from Tom Jones:

> "Attention please! he said in a loud, firm voice. Will the party who addressed me at bedtime last night kindly make himself or herself known by giving an appropriate sign or signal."

The bull-horn sensibility of pig's speech, and the ingenious covering of all bases--"himself or herself" (affirmative action) . . . "sign or signal," betoken a cerebral circuitry in pig that has all the convolutions of a railroad track in arable Kansas.

Let me be brief. Later White begins a paragraph "Darkness settled over everything," echoing the Book of Genesis and Thomson's words in Haydn's "The Creation," setting this modest story once again in its epical context and making farmer Zuckerman's given name of Homer not entirely inappropriate,

The naturalistic directness with which Charlotte's weaving is described--simply, economically, and precisely in terms of radial and orb lines--the whole made graphic with Garth Williams' felicitous illustrations,

these are noteworthy uses of the word.

And let us not forget that, in fact, this story turns on a single and a simple word--the climactic find in the rubbish and garbage by Templeton, the hero manqué, who turns up the talisman, the key to Wilbur's salvation, the sole word that rat tears from the old newspaper, the word Charlotte in her dying last act weaves into the web like Roland putting the famous horn, Oliphant, to his lips at Roncevaux, weaving the magical word HUMBLE. Humble, the characters decide, is exactly the right word. It means "not proud," "near the ground,"--and indeed--who can deny? Wilbur is "not proud," and he is also "near the ground." Again, the joke on the word is subtle, for though no one can deny that the animals and the people too, who visit Wilbur, have the dictionary definition

of the word right, they misconstrue the nuance as do sometimes children, our students, or foreigners, when they look up a word, but have not the custom of it naturally.

And finally, not most critically, but perhaps most beautifully--and this is the point--the exemplification of measure, decorum, and inevitability, which are, after all, the ultimate measure of an art--the concluding two sentences of White's book: "It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both."

That is as grand a closing as that of any novel I know in the language. The penultimate sentence--"It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer."--has the poise, balance, distance, and propriety, the proverb-like pithyness, of a line from, say, Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes." It stands classically, drawing its credibility from the clarity of its expression.

The last sentence--"Charlotte was both."--goes beyond analysis. Exegesis would be a diminution of the impact of its brevity.

What, then,makes a good book? Richness, density, authorial resources--as we have seen them in the use of individual words in Milne, in Potter, in Zindel, and most diversely, in White.

Words are the beginning only. At next year's conference I propose to spin other threads in the web.